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# Stalin, Trump, and the Politics of Narcissism : A Response to Rose McDermott's "The Nature of Narcissism"

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#### ***Stalin, Trump, and the Politics of Narcissism: A Response to Rose McDermott's "The Nature of Narcissism."***

Essay by **Geoffrey Roberts**, University College Cork, Emeritus, and Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 2018-2019

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I was intrigued by Rose McDermott's piece on "The Nature of Narcissism".<sup>1</sup> As a narrative historian of international relations, I appreciated her call for analysis of the "influence of individual-level differences on international outcomes." Central to narrative history is the reconstruction and analysis of the actions and interactions of individuals, as well as people's goals, motivations, feelings, and experiences.

However, I was startled by her characterisation of Joseph Stalin as a narcissist like Donald Trump. It would be difficult to imagine two more different personalities; during decades of work in Stalin's personal archives it never occurred to me he was a narcissist. Indeed, based on McDermott's description of narcissism I would say that Stalin was the complete opposite (more on Trump below).

While Stalin's personality cult performed a political function, he displayed no personal need for such grandiosity. Nor did he seek validation and approval from others (except maybe Vladimir Lenin) or rely on external referents for his self-esteem. Stalin's rejection and sometimes emotional response to criticism was based on strong beliefs, not a fragile ego. Yes, he was paranoid, but his paranoia was political and ideological, not psychological. It was not empathy that Stalin lacked but compassion and sympathy for those he saw as his enemies.

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<sup>1</sup> Rose McDermott, "The Nature of Narcissism," <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5be-narcissism>.

Equally surprising is McDermott's reference to Stalin's reluctance to heed warnings of the June 1941 German invasion of the USSR as a case study in his narcissism—detailed in her recent book (co-authored by Uri Bar-Joseph) on *Intelligence Success and Failure: The Human Factor*.<sup>2</sup>

Full disclosure: a quarter of century ago in an article on Stalin and June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1941 entitled “Military Disaster as a Function of Rational Political Calculation,” I argued there was no need to resort to personal-psychological speculation to explain Stalin's intelligence failure in relation to June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1941.<sup>3</sup> Stalin thought he had good reasons to believe the German invasion would or could be delayed until 1942. He got it catastrophically wrong but the miscalculation was perfectly rational, if not excusable. The one aspect of Stalin's personality that featured centrally in my account was the projection of his own rationality on to Adolf Hitler and the concomitant—and mistaken—calculation that the Nazi dictator would not risk a two-front war.

Since that article my views have evolved to place more emphasis on the failure of military doctrine and preparation. The Soviets were planning to wage an offensive war against Germany whenever Hitler attacked. They anticipated that when the Germans invaded Soviet defences would hold them up at the frontier and then the Red Army would launch a series of massive counter-offensives. Stalin did not so much disbelieve the reports of an imminent German attack as discount their importance because he thought he had the luxury of miscalculating the timing of Hitler's invasion. It was a gamble on the prolongation of peace at not a very high price, or so Stalin thought.<sup>4</sup>

Bar-Joseph and McDermott's book revives the argument that Stalin's miscalculation was rooted in a psychological disorder. There are different spins on this argument but they all originate in the post-1956 critique of Stalin initiated by Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech to the 20th Party Congress. In that speech Khrushchev argued that Stalin took no heed of abundant warnings of a coming German attack and ordered that no credence be given to such information so as not to provoke Hitler.

As many scholars have noted, the evidence of an imminent German invasion was less clear-cut at the time than it appears in retrospect.<sup>5</sup> The intelligence reports crossing Stalin's desk were contradictory and often of

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<sup>2</sup> Rose McDermott and Uri Bar-Joseph, *Intelligence Success and Failure: The Human Factor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). The book was reviewed in an H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable: <https://issforum.org/roundtables/10-15-human-factor>. Unfortunately, none of the contributors is a Soviet specialist.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Roberts, “Military Disaster as a Function of Rational Political Calculation: Stalin and 22 June 1941,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 4:2 (July 1993): 313-330.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's Wars: from World War to Cold War, 1939-1953* (London: Yale University Press, 2006), chap. 3.

<sup>5</sup> A classic study is Barton Whaley's *Codeword Barbarossa* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972). Most recently there is Stephen Kotkin's treatment in *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1928-1941* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), chap.14. See also David Holloway, “Stalin and Intelligence: Barbarossa and the Bomb” in Jonathan Haslam and Karina Urbach, eds., *Secret Intelligence in the European States System, 1918-1989* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 37-80, and E. Mawdsley, “Crossing the Rubicon: Soviet Plans for Offensive War in 1940-1941,” *International History Review* 25:4 (December 2003): 818-865.

dubious provenance. The predicted attack failed to materialise when it was supposed to. A highly successful German disinformation and deception campaign persuaded Soviet decision-makers that Hitler would finish off Britain first and that any attack on the USSR would be preceded by an ultimatum demanding territorial and political concessions.

Bar-Joseph and McDermott's treatment of Stalin and June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1941 is not an historical explanation but an exercise in theory construction and it would be invidious to complain too much about the limitations of their database, which consists mostly of English-language secondary studies. The problem is that these sources contain a good deal of misinformation—undocumented and unverified 'evidence.' Bar-Joseph and McDermott's faulty database leads inevitably to misdiagnosis.<sup>6</sup>

Bar-Joseph and McDermott identify three psychological elements that they say explain Stalin's failure to heed warnings of an imminent German attack. First, Stalin's extreme paranoia and conspiratorial way of thinking. Second, his identification with Hitler the aggressor and his trust in Hitler's peaceful intentions. Third, the high need for cognitive closure that prevented him from recognising he might be mistaken.

An important source of their thinking is Daniel Rancour-Laferriere's *The Mind of Stalin: A Psychoanalytical Study*. According to Rancour-Laferriere, a literary critic, Stalin was marked by megalomania, paranoia, sadism, vindictiveness, and the need to control others. Beaten as a child by an alcoholic father, he was a very insecure person who required the adulation of others. Among his defence mechanisms was an idealised self-image, projection of his faults and failures onto enemies, rationalisation, and identification with the aggressor: "when confronted by Hitler, an aggressor who took out his aggression on homosexuals, Stalin behaved irrationally. He not only identified with that aggressor, he was attracted to him sexually."<sup>7</sup>

This psychoanalytical portrait of Stalin is not one that finds much favour with conventional biographers of the Soviet dictator. Typical would be Hiroaki Kuromiya's comment that "however pathological and irrational Stalin's mental universe may seem...it had not so much a psychological as a political rationale, a rationale shared not only by Stalin's lieutenants but also by a significant segment of the Soviet population."<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the main theme of recent biographical literature on Stalin is the extent to which he was a politically driven personality, someone whose inner mental life was shaped by his public persona and by the ideological universe he inhabited. Stalin's personality was moulded and driven by the politics of a ruthless class war in defence of the revolution and the pursuit of communist utopia. Stalin's oft-noted paranoia reflected and reinforced the domestic weakness of Bolshevism and the international isolation of the Soviet state. As Stephen

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<sup>6</sup> The Bar-Joseph and McDermott book contains another case study of Stalin as decision-maker - in relation to the role of intelligence during the battle for Moscow in autumn 1941. I disagree with some aspects of their analysis, but it seems to me to be basically sound. I agree, in particular, with their emphasis on Stalin as a learning leader. The Stalin depicted in this section of the book is very different from that in the preceding pages about Barbarossa.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, *The Mind of Stalin: A Psychoanalytical Study* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1988), 109-110. My summary is taken from Ronald Grigor Suny's review of the book in *Slavic Review* 49:3 (Autumn 1990): 458-459.

<sup>8</sup> Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin* (Edinburgh: Pearson, 2005), x.

Kotkin put it “the problems of the revolution brought out the paranoia in Stalin and Stalin brought out the paranoia inherent in the revolution.”<sup>9</sup>

Equally striking is the displacement of the narrative of a brutalised young Stalin who grew up to be a monster. Instead we have an image of a studious, well-educated child, a voracious reader who, from early adulthood, defined himself as an intellectual with a mission to enlighten the down-trodden masses.<sup>10</sup>

Not everyone agrees that Stalin was paranoid. Averell Harriman, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s special envoy and ambassador to Moscow during World War II, who had extensive personal dealings with the dictator, was at pains to deny that Stalin was paranoid, as opposed to highly suspicious.<sup>11</sup>

Stalin’s distrust was certainly evident during the run-up to the German invasion of the USSR, when he detected signs of a British plot to embroil the Soviet Union in a war with Hitler. But Stalin was not mistaken. That is exactly what the British were trying to do. When Nazi Deputy Führer Rudolf Hess flew to Britain in May 1941 on a personal mission to broker a peace between Hitler and Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the British authorities kept him in isolation and put out rumours that he was trying to form an Anglo-German alliance against the USSR. The plot worked only too well and when the British tried to warn Stalin that the Germans really were going to attack Russia they were not believed.<sup>12</sup>

As evidence that Stalin trusted and identified with Hitler, Bar-Joseph and McDermott recycle Stalin’s oft-quoted response to Hitler’s purge of the SA in 1934: “Hitler, what a great man! This is the way to deal with your political opponents” (92). The source of this quotation is the highly unreliable Valentin Berezhkov, a mid-ranking official in the Foreign Commissariat who represented himself as Stalin’s interpreter, which he was not, and claimed to have interpreted at Stalin’s first encounter with President Roosevelt—a meeting, at the Tehran conference, that he did not even attend.<sup>13</sup>

A more plausible and interesting source of this story is Stalin’s Trade Minister, Anastas Mikoyan. In his memoirs Mikoyan recalled that Stalin was particularly fond of an English film about a marauding pirate who returned home with a fortune after raids on India and other countries. But the pirate did not want to share the glory (or the loot) with his erstwhile comrades-in-arms and got rid of them by destroying figurines them.

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), 597.

<sup>10</sup> For my own spin: Geoffrey Roberts, “Joseph Stalin: bloody tyrant and bookworm,” *The Irish Times*, 20 September 2016, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/joseph-stalin-bloody-tyrant-and-bookworm-1.2798051>.

<sup>11</sup> “Stalin at War,” interview with Harriman in G.R. Urban, ed., *Stalinism* (Aldershot: Wildwood House, Aldershot 1982), 41-42.

<sup>12</sup> See G. Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), chap.12.

<sup>13</sup> Stalin’s usual interpreter for conversations with English speakers was Vladimir Pavlov, who interpreted at the said meeting with Roosevelt. Also present was Roosevelt’s interpreter, Charles Bohlen. Bohlen’s irate correspondence with Berezhkov about this matter may be found in the Bohlen Papers in the Library of Congress.

While Mikoyan was appalled by this evil sorcery, Stalin exclaimed. “Great, how well he did it!” Mikoyan linked Stalin’s love of the film to the dictator’s admiration for Ivan the Terrible’s destruction of the Russian aristocracy, and with his reported response to Hitler’s Night of the Long Knives: “There’s a fine fellow, that’s great. That’s the way it has to be done!”<sup>14</sup>

The point of Mikoyan’s story is not that Stalin identified with Hitler, or with Ivan the Terrible, but that he admired their methods—which presaged his own during the Great Terror of 1937-1938.

Stalin’s long-time Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, was scathing about the view that Stalin trusted Hitler. “Stalin trusted Hitler? He didn’t trust his own people!”<sup>15</sup> Yet Bar-Joseph and McDermott write that “Stalin’s trust of Hitler was manifest before the war in his total rejection of [Defence Commissar] Timoshenko’s and [Chief of the General Staff] Zhukov’s demands to deploy the Red Army for war. Again and again, he expressed fears that such moves might provoke an unintended conflict” (94).

This is simply unsustainable. Notwithstanding his conviction that war could be delayed, Stalin authorised a myriad of mobilisation measures designed to strengthen the western military districts of the Red Army and to prepare and deploy it for war. These measures culminated with a directive on 21 June warning that a German surprise attack was possible on either the 22<sup>nd</sup> or the 23<sup>rd</sup>. The order was too little, too late, but that had nothing to do with the psychodynamics of Stalin’s relations with Hitler.<sup>16</sup>

Bar-Joseph and McDermott explain what they see as Stalin’s refusal to heed warnings of an imminent attack by reference to his high need for cognitive closure, i.e., his need for certainty and his aversion to ambiguity. This led Stalin, they say, not just to dismiss evidence that contradicted his beliefs, but to preclude anyone else around him from presenting a different estimate of the situation. Again, this is not accurate.

Stalin was presented with plenty of intelligence that contradicted his view that rumours of imminent war were a British plot or part of a war of nerves by Hitler to force territorial and political concessions. Stalin did not like this contrary evidence and sometimes reacted emotionally against it, as on the famous occasion he wrote on an intelligence briefing that a Luftwaffe source was a disinformant and should be told to go f\*\*k with his mother (the source’s, not Stalin’s). But he did not stop the flow of such information or insist that it conform to his own opinions.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Anastas Mikoyan, *Tak Bylo* (Moscow: Vargius 1999), 533-534.

<sup>15</sup> Albert Resis, ed., *Molotov Remembers* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993), 23.

<sup>16</sup> See Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin’s General: The Life of Georgy Zhukov* (New York: Random House, 2012), 97-100.

<sup>17</sup> The key primary source collection of Soviet military intelligence documents is *Voennaya Razvedka Informiruet: Dokumenty Razvedupravleniya Krasnoi Armii, 1939-1941* (Moscow: Demokratiya, 2008).

Field Marshal Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff wrote that “Stalin is a realist...facts only count, plans, hypotheses, future possibilities mean nothing to him, but he is ready to face facts, even when unpleasant.”<sup>18</sup>

Stalin was reluctant to face the fact of an imminent German invasion but eventually did so. He can be criticised for his tardiness but the greater failure was his complacency. Like his generals, Stalin was confident the Red Army could cope with all contingencies. The Soviet High Command did not anticipate the weight of the German attack or its devastating impact on Soviet defences. Nor did they understand that in such circumstances their long-planned counter offensives would expose the Red Army’s forward forces to encirclement, another contingency for which they were unprepared.<sup>19</sup>

Professor McDermott is on much firmer ground when she designates Donald Trump as a narcissist and in her piece she details the impact of his personality on the political style of his administration in general and the conduct of international relations in particular.

As McDermott says, practically everyone agrees that Trump is a narcissist. That is because his narcissism is very public. Much like Stalin, Trump’s personality, it seems to me, derives from his public persona and is constructed not from the inside out but from the outside in.

However, it is not Trump’s narcissism that is shaking up international politics but the America First agenda and the disruptive impact of his policies, such as withdrawal from the Paris accords on climate change, the abandonment of the Trans Pacific Partnership Trade agreement, the critique of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the trade wars with China and the EU, the relocation of the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, the repudiation of the Iran nuclear deal, the militant demand for more spending on defence by NATO members, and the hard-line immigration policy.

Nor are these policies peculiar to Trump; they are widely shared in Republican circles in the United States. They may be wrong-headed and potentially disastrous but they are not irrational. They are certainly not made more explicable by a reductionist analysis predicated on Trump’s narcissism. Like Stalin, Trump has a politics as well as a personality. And, like Stalin’s, Trump’s politics have had a long gestation.<sup>20</sup>

The one position on which Trump deviates from most mainstream Republicans is his soft stance on relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russia. You could argue, I suppose, that as a narcissist Trump identifies with Putin the aggressor and trusts in his peaceful intentions. Or, maybe, that just as Stalin projected his rationalism on to Hitler, Trump sees Putin as a narcissistic kindred spirit.

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<sup>18</sup> Cited by Albert Seaton, *Stalin as a Military Commander* (Conshohocken: Combined Publishing, 1998), 154.

<sup>19</sup> On the encirclement issue see Roger Reese, “Surrender and Capture in the Winter War and Great Patriotic War: Which was the Anomaly?” *Global War Studies* 8:1 (2011): 87-98.

<sup>20</sup> On Trump’s political formation see Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms, *Donald Trump: The Making of a World View* (London: Endeavour Press 2017).

Alternatively, and more plausibly, you could see it as perfectly rational for the President of the United States to seek an equitable relationship with the leader of the world's second most powerful nuclear state, as not unreasonable for Trump to view Russia as just another a great power defending its vital interests, and eminently sensible for Washington to seek cooperation with Moscow in areas of common interest, such as the fight against international terrorism.

Personality can be very important in politics but more often it is policies that really matter.

**Geoffrey Roberts** is Emeritus Professor of History at University College Cork and a Member of the Royal Irish Academy. The author of many books and articles on Soviet and Russian foreign and military policy, he will be EURIAS Senior Fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in 2018-2019. His current research topics include the postwar communist peace movement, Stalin and Churchill during World War II, and Stalin's personal library.

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